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Seeking Relief From Negative Emotions: Customer Revenge As An Emotional Outlet

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ABSTRACT

Customer revenge as a form of customer misbehaviour has attracted increasing attention in service marketing. Previous research suggests that customer revenge can take various forms, ranging from aggressive behaviours towards the employees to negative word-of-mouth (NWOM) (Grégoire, Laufer, & Tripp, 2010). While a number of studies have examined the cognitive aspect of customer revenge (i.e. perceived unfairness), the emotional aspect is relatively understudied. This research aims to contribute to the literature in two ways. First, it will investigate the role of three moral emotions (i.e. anger, contempt and disgust) in translating perceived unfairness into various revengeful behaviours (i.e. H1). Second, it will examine whether revenge is employed by customers as an emotion regulatory strategy to ameliorate their negative emotions (i.e. H2).

To test H1, a 2 (distributive fairness: low vs high) X 2 (procedural fairness: low vs high) X 2 (interactional fairness: low vs high) between subjects experimental design was conducted. Participants were asked to read a hotel service recovery scenario where the various dimensions of fairness were manipulated. Results demonstrated that anger mediates the effect of distributive and interactional fairness in the various revengeful behaviours (i.e. aggression, vindictive complaining, vindictive NWOM, and third-party complaining). Furthermore, contempt mediates the effect of distributive and interactional fairness in aggression, vindictive complaining, and vindictive NWOM but not third-party complaining. Procedural fairness did not have a significant impact on customer revenge. Similarly, disgust did not act as a mediator between perceived fairness and customer revenge.

To test H2, a 2 (mood change beliefs: present vs control) one factor experimental design was employed. Participants read an airline service scenario that involved a failed service recovery. Following the procedures used by Bushman, Baumeister, and Phillips (2001), participants in the mood change belief condition were led to believe that at the end of the experiment they will have positive emotions while in the control condition there were no such instructions. The logic behind this manipulation is that if individuals believe that exacting revenge will alleviate their negative emotions, providing them with another way to feel better (i.e. recall of a happy experience) will reduce their revengeful behaviours. Findings from the experiment demonstrate that individuals employ vindictive complaining, vindictive NWOM and third-party complaining but not aggression with the intention to feel better.